

Second Sunday of Easter

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Reverend Diane Wong

This 2nd Sunday of Easter is famously referred to as “low Sunday.” Looking at the church attendance today in contrast to Easter Sunday, we may amusingly agree to this description. But “low Sunday” points to other things as well, in contrast to Easter Sunday. Because of the low attendance, it leads to a lower level of excitement. Holy Week is so intense and packed with services that lead to Easter Sunday, this 2nd Sunday of Easter has been viewed as an emotional letdown, as though the joy and hope of Easter can last only one or two days let alone the 50 days of Eastertide. So, a week after Easter, we are back to life as normal, before we are filled with the power, joy, and hope of Jesus’ Resurrection. Does that describe us?

The disciples’ behavior also shows why today is called Low Sunday. Both in the evening of the Resurrection Day, and also a week later, today the disciples are still behind locked doors because of their fears of the Jews who cried out to crucify Jesus. Maybe they are afraid that someone among them would be next. Maybe they are actually fearful of one another, wondering who among them might be the next to betray the group. Even after Jesus’ appearance to them, despite the joy of Jesus’ resurrection, they are confused and also fearful. They are low in courage even after the Resurrection.

All 4 gospels have one thing in common about the disciples the day and week after Jesus’ Resurrection - that they are filled with doubt and fear. Even good news does not erase fear. Even the hope inspired by good news does not eliminate genuine fear. It takes time for good news to sink in and trust.

So, without breaking down doors and locks, Jesus miraculously appears to the disciple, showing them his hands, his feet and his side; his wounds, as if he knows this is what it takes for them to believe that he is the crucified and risen Jesus. Thomas was not present to witness Jesus’ appearance. When the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the lord, Thomas utters the famous words, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger in the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Because he wants to see what the others have already

been given and seen, he is labeled doubting Thomas, which is a bit unfair to Thomas. If we were in his place, we would have asked for the same thing.

One commentator says that perhaps Thomas can't believe what the other disciples told him because he can't see any difference in his friends. A week after Jesus appeared to them and given them the power of the Holy Spirit, they are still frightened of being arrested by the religious authorities and hiding behind closed doors. Jesus' appearance seems not to have made a difference in their lives.

But let's not criticize the disciples too much. We have experienced often God's amazing grace, God's presence, yet we still have a hard time trusting in God being there for us. We need to have all the facts and certainties before we can commit to calls to participate in God's missions. It is still hard for us to say "yes".

Why does Jesus appear to the disciples who abandoned him? Jesus knows they need to experience a heavy dose of a sense of peace to overcome their fear. They can't do it themselves. Even with the good news from Mary Magdalene, the disciples are still stuck in their fear, hiding behind locked doors. So despite their betrayal, the risen Jesus in his love and compassion, stands before them, greets them with and offers them words of peace and comfort. "Peace be with you!" Jesus comes among them, as the Spirit is with us in our darkest times, to calm their hearts and minds. A gift of the Resurrection.

Whatever we feel - hurt, fear, doubt, frustration, Jesus meets us right where we are. Jesus doesn't wait for Thomas to stop doubting to come to him. He doesn't wait for the disciples to overcome their fear to come to them. Christ comes to us, also, before we stop doubting, before our lives are in order, and before we figure everything out, and offer us peace.

The amazing thing about God is that the resurrected Jesus still trusts the very human disciples, and continue to charge them with God's mission. "As the father has sent me, so I send you." And Jesus empowers them by giving them the Holy Spirit. "Receive the Holy Spirit." Gifts of the Resurrection. So, Jesus appears to them to give them the gifts of the Resurrection - peace, comfort, forgiveness, trust, mission, and new life in the Spirit, the life-giving breath of God.

Whether we are ready or not, the resurrected Jesus continues to send us out to proclaim and share the gifts of the Resurrection. There is so much tragic news and events that the gifts of the Resurrection must be shared and proclaimed by us as resurrected people. We must not let messages of senseless deaths and violence and alienation mute the Easter message. And we cannot put the resurrected life on the shelf until the next Easter comes around.

God is constantly at work creating, re-creating, and sustaining us to do things we could not have imagined previously because the future is open. Jesus continues to challenge, bless and commission all of us to take part in God's re-creating work; to send us out into the world, for example, to care for this precious and fragile earth for present and future generations, to care for the world where conflicts and struggles take place, where people suffer because of oppression, and where people die because of senseless violence. When anyone suffers in this world and in our community, they can be assured of God's steadfast love in this life, with the Resurrection gifts that we share.

John's Gospel invites each of us to be part of the resurrection story and to become living witnesses to new life in our various contexts, to show that our world is not defined by evil and death, rather by God's grace and mercy. This is what the Resurrection means.

Let's just think about this - what would it look like if everything we do is to allow more and more people experience the gifts of the Resurrection - peace, new life, hope, abundant life through us? That through the life of this faith community, more and more people, within the community and beyond, would encounter the presence of the risen Jesus and come to faith and experience God's abundant life?

Yesterday at the NEAT dinner, there were more volunteers from Covenant Church than from our church or Park Avenue Congregational Church. And the Covenant Church volunteers were all whole-heartedly enthusiastic in serving the guests. They are so glad that they can participate in this ministry to serve those in Arlington. Are we allowing them to experience the gifts of the Resurrection - peace, hope, new life, abundant life?

Are we allowing others to experience the gifts of the Resurrection through our Lectionary Reflection sessions? Through our Coffee Hours, or the Ukrainian Resettlement Project? Through what we do, through our care for each other, our faith deepens and God's presence is made evident?

The Resurrection offers us a new way to be in the world and in our neighborhood. Low Sunday or not, this is what we are sent to do on behalf of the crucified and risen Christ. In spite of the fears, doubts, and skepticism within ourselves and around us, we are invited to be a resurrected people, and we trust in God's gifts of the Resurrection to be Christ's witnesses.

If by chance we are in fact still in our Easter high, maybe we are experiencing the life-giving breath of God which makes all things new; the new life and the spirit of God covering our bones, enabling us to be a resurrected community of God's hopeful people.

Maybe we are experiencing the special blessing of "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Maybe we have faith in the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, as Paul says in Hebrews (11:1). We are so assured of the presence of the risen Jesus amongst us that we can, even without concrete evidence and certainties, say "yes" to being called by God to participate in the continuing work of God's creation.

Maybe this Sunday should not be called Low Sunday, but gifting Sunday, which is a more significant thing for us to remember and celebrate. Amen.

Inspired by Matt Skinner, the Rev. Canon Rosemarie Logan Duncan, David Lose, Debi Thomas, Heidi Haverkamp